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ABSTRACT

The literature of education reveals a growing concern with the problems of job-related stress and an increasing incidence of burnout among teachers. An understanding of what causes burnout (i.e., to deplete oneself, to exhaust one's physical and mental resources, to wear oneself out by excessively striving to reach some unrealistic expectation) among community college humanities instructors requires a look at national, departmental, and personal influences. The character, role, and functions of the community college and its students demand that teachers devote a great deal of time and energy and undergo pressure and stress to combat student-worker boredom, alienation, exhaustion, and indifference. Society expects the community college to improve retention, increase access, establish and maintain high standards, and prepare students for the workforce, while at the same time national priorities have diminished the ability of colleges to fulfill their promises and meet societal expectations. This classical burnout structure is compounded for humanities faculty, whose courses are considered frills, whose teaching load is divided among the "elite" humanities courses and the "service" remediation and composition courses, and who often face interdepartmental and interpersonal conflict. Finally, burnout can occur on an individual level through defeated idealism, long-term conditioning, and unrewarding job conditions. Individuals can combat burnout by being realistic about the problems in community colleges, by taking stock of their own goals and aspirations, and by re-entering the labyrinth of learning and discovery. In addition, the issue of burnout must be addressed on a local and national scale to not only cure but prevent burnout. (HB)

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THE BURNED-OUT COMMUNITY COLLEGE HUMANITIES INSTRUCTOR: CAUSES AND CURES

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The Burned-Out Community College Humanities Instructor: Causes and Cures

In the history of words, the word burnout is relatively new. The term shellshocked seems to have gone out of fashion after World War Two, and the phrases "battle fatigue" and "combat neurosis," are perceived as self-pitying or humorous hyperbole by the general public. Teachers have settled for the term burnout. It has not quite achieved legitimate status in formal usage, however, for under the Index to Humanities category "Burnout" is the instruction: "See Stress, Occupational." Under "Occupational Stress" the 1963-1964 Index lists ten entries, with the number holding at eleven a decade later. But with the current Index the number jumps to forty-eight entries and reads "see also Am. Inst. of Stress, Anxiety, TMJ Syndrome, and Traumatism." Clearly stress and burnout are a growth industry. If these were stocks, you would want to invest heavily. The titles of articles are also indicative of changing eras: from mundane 'sixties' entries such as "How Some Busy People Let off Steam," scientific studies have arisen such as "High Stress Lowers I.Q. Scores," and "Maternal Stress Alters Plasma Testosterone in Fetal Females." Others have ominous titles such as "Gloom in the Womb" or simply "Three Mile Island." Clearly, the Age of Burnout is upon us.

Workers in the helping professions, social workers, nurses, counselors, and juvenile custodians seem to have gotten the lead in creating discourse

on burnout, rapidly followed in the 'seventies' by public school teachers. A Chicago teachers' union found that fifty-six per cent of over five-thousand respondents claimed physical or mental illness as a result of their job (Phi Delta Kappan, Dec 1979). With 110,000 teachers physically attacked in the 1978-1979 school year, with one-forth of all teachers reporting personal property stolen or damaged during the year, and with many qualified teachers leaving the profession, the problem had to be addressed. But health officials were unable to contain the disease in public schools, so now "creeping burnout" is infecting even higher education.

In a 1984 study of 80 doctoral granting institutions, Gmelch, Lorvich, and Wilke report that 60% of the stress in faculty members' lives comes from work, and that of the three major faculty functions--teaching, research, and service--teaching clearly causes the most stress (Phi Delta Kappan, Jan. 1984). Of course stress in itself is not necessarily bad. Frequently we need stress, seek it, and function best under it. But extreme and prolonged stress will take its toll and frequently result in burnout.

As a way of defining burnout, Walsh in the December 1979 Phi Delta Kappan lists five characterisitics of the burned-out condition as established by California Doctors Bloch and Maslach:

1) a reaction of the nervous system to stress, leading to a variety of physical diseases

2) a disruption of personal professional life as a result of occupational stress

3) destructive feelings of emotional stress as a result of ineffective coping

4) loss of concern and detachment from those with whom you work

5) a cynical and dehumanized perception of students, accompanied by a deterioration of the quality of teaching.

Psychologist Herbert J. Freudenberg in his excellent book titled Burnout: The High Cost of High Achievement provides a precise formal definition:

> Burnout: to deplete oneself, to exhaust one's physical and mental resources. To wear oneself out by excessively striving to reach some unrealistic expectation imposed by one's self or by the values of society. (New York: Bantam Books, 1980, p. 17)

The key phrases are "exhaust resources," "excessively striving," and "unrealistic expectations."

What on the national, departmental, and individual level causes burnout in community college humanities teachers? The way the community college fits into the national education scheme reminds me of a Corvair pickup I bought a few years ago. The eager seller said he didn't like it because "it ain't exactly a car and it ain't really a pickup either." Similarly, a community college ain't exactly a high school, but then it ain't really college either. An attorney friend calls the community college where I work a "high school with ash trays." This is not entirely accurate. As we live in Wyoming, the college also has a few spitoons. That humanities teachers in this bastard-child of the higher education establishment are burning out is indicated by the title of meeting number two-hundred and sixty-two at the Modern Language Association annual meeting to be held in Washington D.C. this December--"The Scholar-Teacher at a Two-Year College: Strategies for Integration within the Profession." The individual paper titles also reveal various degrees of burnout: "Unrealistic Teaching Loads and Threatened Literature Sections," "Promotion and Tenure Policies," and "The Plight of the Community College Scholar." Perhaps the most revelatory item is the forth on the agenda: "cash bar follows."

Since the community college system did not fall out of the sky, where did it come from? As you are well aware, the rise of the community college

system is primarily a post-World War Two phenomenon. In the post-war business expansion, a college degree was virtual insurance of a respectable white-collar job. A million returning veterans helped to expand the university system and democratize collegiate elitism. With a continued need for skilled workers and a demand by the working class and by minority groups for an equal chance at higher education and the American Dream, community colleges were built which now enroll over four million.

We all know the altruistic reasons for building colleges and attending them, but as Ira Shor points out in Critical Teaching and Everyday Life, part of the movement behind building the Community College campuses was to absorb surplus labor and domestic over production (only the first problem is still with us):

> The decision to build a massive infrastructure of two-year campuses has placed a permanent fiscal burden on the state. Here we have the spectacle of an irrationally productive economy which can move ahead only by creating a gigantic non-productive parasite on itself. The vast school system joins the defense budget and welfare as ironic monuments to American enterprise. (Boston: South End Press, 1980, p. 5)

Indeed, the establishment of 600 community colleges since 1960 reflects a considerable investment in materials and manpower. It also allows the elite schools to remain elite. American higher education now enrolls 12 million students, employs 2 million people, and constitutes three per cent of the Gross National Product (Mortimer, et al., "Involvement in Learning: Realizing the Potential of American Higher Education," Chronicle of Higher Education, 24 Oct. 1984, p. 35). With growth has come added complexity. Junior colleges added vo-tech, remediation, adult education, continuing education, credentialing, public service courses, and a variety of non-credit classes. As merchanisers of basic courses, community colleges have become the K-Mart of higher education. A parady of a K-Mart jingle is not too far fetched:

Community college is everything a great college should be.
Quality at discount prices
Teachers work hard and are nicest.

Micro Biology
And Micro Wave Cooking.
You can learn to be a Star
Or even learn to wax your car

Community college is everthing a great college could be
Commun-i-tee Coll-ege

Community colleges provide a place where high school goof-offs can redeem themselves, Community colleges take pressure off high schools because students can play catch-up later. Students no longer flunk out of the university, they "go back to the community college." Universities can remain cold and aloof because students unable to adjust to their impersonal bureaucracies can be counseled to "go back to the community college." In short, there is nothing wrong with high school and university education that the elimination of the community college would not make glaringly evident. While the expansion boom was on, many teachers had high hopes, but now that building and enrollment growth has peaked, expectations crash against the concrete reality of the existing system and burnout occurs.

One of the functions of a community college, especially in times of sustained economic stagnation such as we have been experiencing, is a warehousing of labor. With few jobs available, many students start or return to college to upgrade skills, to retrain, or simply to idle time until the economy picks up. Most work part-time and thus constitute a huge, temporary, disorganized, low-paid and easily manipulated labor pool for businesses to exploit. The community colleges have become custodians of students caught between part-time and full-time work. Forty-one per cent of those enrolled in higher education are part-time students. Certainly the percentage is higher in community colleges. And so the community college is charged with culturizing the students into the regimentation of institutional life modeled on the

private and state corporate bureaucratic structures. Through the community college system, the business world makes its most deeply felt penetration into higher education. The community college humanities teacher, sailing off on an exploration of the sea of world culture, with what she presumes is a crew of eager sailors wanting to learn the secrets of navigation, suddenly finds herself crashing on the rocks of student-worker boredom, alienation, exhaustion and indifference. Of course the problem of inspiring indifferent students has been addressed and met successfully many times. But they do take time and energy, and frequently cause great deal of stress, which, if continued over a long period of time, can cause burnout. Be prepared for the pressure to mount. The writers of the recent federal report on excellence in undergraduate education, worried because 50% of the students who start college drop out, advocate an increased college population base and retention rate:

> Access to higher education should be extended to an ever increasing proportion of the population, regardless of age. At the same time, the dropout rate of college students needs to be reduced. American society must use all of the means at its disposal to avoid these wastes of human potential and to engage every willing student in continued learning.

At the same time the report compilers state, as might be expected, that "colleges, community colleges, and universities should establish and maintain high standards of student and institutional performance." The report writers find the entire higher educational system sub-standard, and the authors reflect their disappointment as follows:

> The realities of student learning, curricular coherence, the quality of facilities, faculty morale, and academic standards no longer measure up to our expectations. These gaps between the ideal and the actual are serious warning signals. They point to both current and potential problems that must be recognized and addressed. (p. 36)

Interestingly, the above language, under their heading of "The Warning Signals," is similar to Freudenberg's definition of burnout: "To wear oneself out by

excessively striving to reach some unrealistic expectation imposed by one's self or by the values of society." The "Report on Excellence in Undergraduate Education" is but another socially induced ideal or expectation which can add substantially to burnout. Freudenberg writes: "Whenever the expectation level is dramatically opposed to reality and the person persists in trying to reach that expectation, trouble is on the way" (p. 13). Indeed, every self-help guide to burnout includes a section on evaluating one's ideals; yet the report glaringly omits a realistic appraisal of the origins and continuance of society's expectations associated with a college education.

When the pastoral, rural campus emerged in the 'twenties it was a place where wealthy mom and dad could send son and daughter so adolescent excesses would not be an embarrassment--and perhaps so their own middle-age craziness could not be detected by the children. Higher education was irrelevant to employment for many of them, as the family business already had a slot for them. When the technologizing of America and acceleration of a credit-based mass consumer society provided a need for a more skilled and sophisticated worker, many middle-class students attended college and got better jobs. In the fifties the community college movement started in earnest. On one level it has been astonishingly successful, for millions of formerly disenfranchised working-class families have cashed in on the American Dream of rising opportunities through higher education. Launched at first from high schools, rented office space, or old Army barracks, community colleges sprouted all over America with their budget fiberglass chairs, formica tables, fast food cafeterias and flickering flourescent lights--a monument to bleak American functionalist architecture. But behind the utilitarian facade of glass and cinderblocks still lurks the dream of the elite campus, the place where a student has the leisure to grow culturally, politically, spiritually, and personally. Likewise, the fantasy that an A.S. or B.A. degree can insure the possessor a good job

endlessly flickers before the eyes of teachers, students, and the general public, even though a Ph.D. and an M.A. are relatively worthless on the current job market. The college system can no longer deliver what it has been promising. Clearly, the federal panel on excellence in higher education admits this, but it places all of the blame on the colleges and none on the promises. Ironically, President Reagan's national priorities in the last four years have increasingly diminished the ability of colleges to fulfill the old promises and expectations surrounding higher education. The federal panel has created a classical burnout structure.

How do the humanities fit into the national and state community college equation? Minimally, you probably correctly answered. Caught in a tug-of-war between vo-tech and liberal arts, students are slotted into and freely choose the quickest route to a job, and that excludes the so called "frills" of the humanities: literature, art, history, film studies, theatre, American studies, philosophy, and so on. However, this triumph of a class-based job-market curriculum over one geared toward creating freely developing minds is no accident, as Shor notes:

> The anti-humanities of the community colleges anticipates future work relations. The work-world can tolerate neither the economic demands of worker-graduates nor the development of their critical faculties. Career training is a way of keeping workers materially and ideologically in their place. Vocationalism economically reproduces stratification and politically retards alternative thought. The curriculum enforces the rules of working life. Employers do not want workers who think for themselves or who demand and deserve raises and advancement. (p. 24)

My own experiences teaching Industrial Communications to future coal field technicians confirms Shor's analysis. Obedience and regimentation were ever-present behavioral objectives communicated by the director controlling the program sponsored by multi-national energy companies.

There are causes of burnout on the departmental level also, and not surprisingly some are related to the historical evolution of community colleges. As they evolved out of high schools, the first instructors were often high school teachers who held or then completed the M.A. to enjoy the prestige of teaching college where there was no study hall duty and where they did not have to take money at high school basketball games. Now community colleges are filling up with Ph.D.'s whose concerns with scholarship and theoretical issues frequently differ significantly from the "traditional" community college teacher. Sometimes it is difficult to determine if the old guard has a better grasp of the reality of the community college system or if they simply are not high achievers. After all, only high achievers burn out.

It is the rare and lucky humanities teacher in a community college who teaches humanities exclusively. Most spend their waking and dream life wrestling with convoluted sentences and immature thought processes in a never-ending stream of freshman composition papers. Humanities courses are the elite courses; the rest, the remediation and the composition courses are the "service" courses. France's Minister of Culture stated earlier this year, "In France, as in other countries, what we think of as culture has been appropriated by an elite who have come to consider knowledge and education a privilege." It is indeed ironic that in community colleges, that most egalitarian part of the higher-education system, all too frequently an elitist sentiment is endorsed and perpetuated. Nervous about the status of a community college, all too many humanities teachers rely heavily on an established canon of so called "masterpieces" because of the socially endowed prestige and authority of the texts. A course about the implications of the automobile in American history will be suspect while any course using Homer and Shakespeare is automatically sanctioned. Ironically, it is

only the secure elite universities that offer the former course without continual justification.

With the burden of remediation and composition, even burned out humanities teachers cling tenaciously to their courses for fear that giving them up would cost them what little prestige community college teaching offers. Good proposals are blocked by fears of empire building and jealousy. One possible way out of this deadlock is to rotate all humanities courses among qualified individuals on a systematic basis. A priority could be given to a combination of preparation and longevity, thus inducing non-qualified people to enroll in graduate courses to become qualified. This would have the further advantage of making each member in the department an equal member so that each has a vested interest in the humanities developing as a whole.

Inter-departmental strife is another source of burnout. The negativist as every meeting, the departmental obstructionist (sometimes, but not always a burnout case), the one who questions every proposal out of habit or perversity, assaults every issue proposed, attacks every new idea, turns even routine matters into a cat and dog fight and evokes repressed reservoirs of hysteria in other department members is a major source of burnout. The "high standards" argument is used one time, the "send me your humble and poor" another; the seniority argument arises and then the university standards; now the Harvard model, now the high school; local autonomy is suddenly switched to serving the corporate needs. Perhaps because community colleges try to be all things to all people, all these arguments have enough merit that they legitimately arise, and thus the obstructionist hides behind a screen of discourse that masks the intention and effect. Meetings make some people give up.

Any micro-social system wherein personal ideologies or friendships usurp rational pedegogical debate can be a source of conflict within a department. These are sometimes called cliques. A "good old boys" buddy system can act as a power block which creates frustration and hopelessness. The feminist movement is beneficial to many women on a community college campus, providing companionship, information-sharing, bonding, and a way to combat alienation. But when feminists function as a clique, they do so at the expense of burning out other members of the department and weakening the department and institution. Religious cliques or political movements can have the same exhausting effect.

Finally, burnout can occur on an individual level. That is, no amount of adjustment of the national, state, or departmental system may be capable of giving certain individuals job satisfaction. Whatever the cause of burnout, a change of pace, plan, or an adjustment on the part of the individual is necessary. The potential burnout is first of all an idealist. Idealism is an admirable trait, perhaps necessary in good teaching, but the burned-out idealist is not a sympathetic figure--cranky, critical, angry, rigid, resistant to suggestions, lacking a sense of humor, and filled with obnoxious behavior patterns that turn people off.

Sometimes burnout often takes place over a period of years, often having taken root in childhood when parental expectations were internalized. While subsequent life is spent trying to fulfill these expectations, one continually falls just short of one's goals, is never satisfied; and so one throws oneself into even bigger projects and works harder and--if rewards are not forthcoming--burns out. Gmelch, Nicholas, and Wilke found that the number one stressor among faculty at doctoral granting universities was "imposing excessively high self-expectations." Another deep-seated cause

of burnout is living out an old family myth--"By God, we Joneses never had much money, but by God we worked hard and never complained." So here we are up to our eyebrows with papers or books, or an unpublished manuscript, or stacks of papers--not complaining, but slowly burning out. For a goal-oriented person, attaining a M.A. or a Ph.D. is worthy project, but afterwards, what? Torpor, listlessness, boredom--no chorus of angels, no fanfare, life just goes on. Goal oriented people thrive as long as the efforts are paying off, but when there is no pay off or when payoff stops, burnout sets in. False expectations in a marriage or relationship can also cause burnout, as can unfulfilled expectations about student performance in a class in which one has put an inordinate amount of time and effort.

Sometimes the burnout has good reason to be angry and burned out. Since the burnout personality is a high achiever he or she is often a bit of a maverick, full of new ideas and willing to take risks, break new ground, challenge accepted but outmoted structures--just the type that gets passed over for promotion in favor of the slow, steady but uninspiring colleague. When the dynamic achiever is working under people who are his or her intellectual inferiors, burnout is on the way.

Finally, perhaps no amount of national, institutional or departmental adjustment or therapy can change the plunge toward burnout. Perhaps the idea of mass education now creates nausea. Perhaps the entire mass worker/soldier/consumer culture which the community college supports has become increasingly repugnant. Then, perhaps it is time to get out, find a different way of life, join a Zen monastery, travel to the far East, become a starving artist, or a mercenary soldier--all of which occupations will confirm the irrelevance of most higher education. A more cautious approach would be to do one of the above while on a leave-of-absence. If the system does not fit, and you cannot change the system, by all means get out.

But if one does want to teach, a more feasible alternative is to take up a hobby. Buying a sailboat or an old XKE Jaguar, or an old Harley Davidson motorcycle to restore will not only consume all the time that was previously spent worrying about school, it will also suddenly make the meager salary highly appreciated. Remember, no salary, no hobby. Following the restoration of the Harley, one could join a motorcycle gang, which would make the paranoia of school seem insignificant by comparison.

The latter gets us into an area of what Freudenberg calls "false cures" for burnout--areas of mental and sensory stimulation used to compensate for mental depression on the job: drugs, alcohol, a business venture, sexual adventurism, gambling, religion, politics, anything that creates intense sensation or the promise of a reward not to be found on the job. This does not cure or address the cause of burnout--in fact it increases the stress level. Pretending the problem does not exist, saying one does not care, does not work either. One only distances oneself from colleagues, students, the institution and takes another step on the path toward burnout. The typical response when there is no reward is to double the effort, which of course only intensifies burnout if the effort is futile.

If burnout were easy to cure, it would not exist. The potential burnout should stop and take stock, lighten the load, and take a break. If you think you absolutely cannot take a break, then you have just spotted part of the problem. At a public access cable television conference in Albuquerque that I attended a few years ago, one of the speakers remarked that public access cable T.V. is a high stress environment and "if you are burned out, get out and let someone else do it." I was intensely angered, even though I was an anonymous face to the speaker so obviously the remark was not aimed deliberately at me. In retrospect, I realize that the truth hurt. I had poured hundred

of hours into a broken-down public access station with a small video class with no support from the community or the college. When colleagues were heading for the bar on Friday night after school, I was heading for the t.v. station to put on "Friday Night Almost Live in Casper." In maintaining a schedule of six hours of programming a week, on top of a full load of freshman composition, I wore myself to a frazzle. I had temporarily burned-out, and it was time to get out.

Be realistic about the problems in community colleges. You did not cause them and you cannot cure them. Take stock of your own goals and aspirations. Can you satisfy them? Is that vow of poverty you took when you entered the teaching profession still worth keeping? What did you like about being a student and the years in graduate school? Are you still doing these things? If not, start doing them again. Re-enter the labrynth of learning and discovery, reading, questioning, challenging.

We need to address the issue of burnout on a local and national scale. We need to devleop some kind of social-professional support system. We need to "normalize" psychological counseling and urge our health plans to include it. We need lighter teaching loads, more travel pay, higher salaries, more humanities courses and greater recognition for our efforts. Burnout is not only curable but preventable.

ERIC Clearinghouse for Junior Colleges

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